

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

DENNIS CABRERA

AUGUST 10, 2006

CACTUS FLAT, SOUTH DAKOTA

INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL HOSKING

ORAL HISTORY #2006-13  
ACCESSION #MIMI 016

MINUTEMAN MISSILE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR





## ABSTRACT

Dennis Cabrera was career Air Force and “involuntarily” transferred into the 44<sup>th</sup> Missile Wing, South Dakota, in 1974. After completing the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in 1967, Cabrera entered the U. S. Air Force in accounting and finance. Once in South Dakota, Cabrera was assigned to the 67<sup>th</sup> Strategic Missile Squadron for the first two years as a Missile Combat Crew Commander, then transferring to the wing staff as an Emergency War Order (EWO) instructor for his final two years. He remained with the U. S. Air Force until his retirement in 1991.

## EDITORIAL NOTICE

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INFORMANT: DENNIS CABRERA  
INTERVIEWER: MIKE HOSKING  
DATE: 10 August 2006

MICHAEL HOSKING: It's August 10th, 2006. I'm meeting with Dennis Cabrera. Is that the proper pronunciation?

DENNIS CABRERA: Yes.

HOSKING: And the last name is C-a-b-r-e-r-a. My name is Mike Hosking, and we're at the Visitors Center for Minuteman Missile National Historic Site. Dennis has been volunteering for us for the summer. I've been trying to get a hold of you before you leave. I keep thinking you're just going to be here and be here.

CABRERA: Getting down to the wire here. Five more days.

HOSKING: Five more days?

CABRERA: We're leaving on the eighteenth. Actually, we're leaving on the twenty-first, on Monday.

HOSKING: I took it for granted you'll be here and you'll be here, so it's like, oh shoot, do this later, but now later is here.

CABRERA: I kind of feel like wallpaper. It's always there.

HOSKING: What we'll do is just start with the general questions first and work on down to the more specific things once you get into the missile fields up here. We'll do the good personal one first. Usually, we're just interested in the birth date and where you were born.

CABRERA: Okay. August 17th, 1945, New York City.

HOSKING: And you live now in California.

CABRERA: Right.

HOSKING: How long have you been out there?

CABRERA: Since 1991. I met my wife in Southern California. We were both stationed there in the late eighties, and then she got an assignment to Japan, so I retired and went to Japan with her. Then she got reassigned to California, and then she retired there and we've been there ever since.

HOSKING: You were both in the Air Force?

CABRERA: Yes.

HOSKING: When did you join the Air Force?

CABRERA: Nineteen sixty-seven.

HOSKING: What rank?

CABRERA: Second lieutenant.

HOSKING: Did you do ROTC?

CABRERA: Yeah. I was in ROTC from '65 to '67. I graduated, got commissioned, and my first assignment was Loring Air Force Base in Limestone, Maine.

HOSKING: Okay. What's up there?

CABRERA: Well, it was B52 base back then.

HOSKING: How did you get into the missile part of it?

CABRERA: I was involuntarily transferred. I was stationed at a base near Phoenix, Arizona. I had been in accounting and finance for about seven years. That's one of those fields where you can be involuntarily transferred to missiles if they need you. So I called the personnel at Texas and said, "Do I have at least a choice of bases?" And the guy said, "Yeah. North Dakota or South Dakota." I said, "What about that base near Cheyenne, Wyoming?" Because it was near Denver. He said, "North Dakota or South Dakota." At that point, south sounded better than north, so here I am.

HOSKING: Was that the first time you ever heard about the missile program?

CABRERA: The first I actively heard about it. I wasn't actually involved in it. I had heard about it before, but I wasn't really terribly interested in it. Having said that, I mean, I wasn't exactly dragged kicking and screaming. I actually really enjoyed being there. It was a whole different way of life than what I'd been used to for the previous seven years. It was not an eight-to-five kind of job, so I enjoyed that, but it took a little of getting used to.

One of the problems, too, was . . . well, not a problem, but one of the things I experienced going to Vandenberg, it's not a very highly technical job, but it involved tech data and I'd never been involved with tech data before. There were seven people in the class I was in. There were four other captains, all of whom had experience in either maintenance or operations in missiles or airplanes. Coming from accounting and finance was sort of like . . . getting

used to dealing with tech data took a while. There were a couple of checklists that essentially involved checking whether a circuit breaker had tripped or not. But in terms of getting the big picture, it took a while to realize that that's all it was. So it was kind of a cultural shock for the first couple of weeks, but I kind of got used to that.

HOSKING: So you came to South Dakota, and this was the only place you ever dealt with the missiles?

CABRERA: Yes. The deal back then was that if you got into missiles either as a second lieutenant fresh out of college, or as in my case, coming from another career field, the guarantee was that after four years, you could choose to either stay in missiles and do something else and kind of go up through that career path, or go back to your other career field, which I did after four years.

HOSKING: I guess with a career path in missiles, was there a lot to do?

CABRERA: Well, yeah. For instance, after you were on crew for a while, you could become a staff officer. Like in my case, I was a classroom instructor for the last two years I was there. You could be, for instance, the head of that section eventually, you could be the head of another division, like stand board or training, you could be a squadron commander eventually, you could be in the chain of deputy commander for operations and maintenance, and whatnot. So there was a career path. Not everybody made it, but it was a possibility at least.

HOSKING: You said you got in the Air Force in '67.

CABRERA: Right.

HOSKING: How long did it take before you got into the missiles?

CABRERA: That was 1974.

HOSKING: So a few years.

CABRERA: About seven years, yeah.

HOSKING: Through our conversations off and on throughout the summer, you were only in the 67th Squadron?

CABRERA: I was in the 67th for two years, and then when I was an EWO instructor, I was part of the wing staff. I was still in the operations part, but I wasn't on crew anymore. It was not in the 67th.

HOSKING: But you never did crew duty anywhere else outside of the 67th?

CABRERA: Oh no.

HOSKING: When you were out at Ellsworth, did you live on base, or did you live in town?

CABRERA: Yes, lived on base.

HOSKING: How was life there? A lot to do? I know it was quite a bit larger then than it is now.

CABRERA: Uh, yeah. I've done a lot more now being here in the summer than I did back then, because the problem with being in the Air Force, they kind of want you to come into the office once in a while. When you weren't actually on alert, you had several days of training each month. With EWO training, hardware training, codes training, you had additional duties in the office, and whatnot. But you did have time off. Mostly just taking care of business on base, mowing the lawn, shoveling the snow, doing the shopping, taking care of the kid, and we did some traveling. We'd go down to Denver once in a while. We did Mt. Rushmore once, the usual touristy kind of stuff.

HOSKING: How do you feel like the local population treated the Air Force personnel?

CABRERA: Well, good news, bad news. Take eating, for example. There was a place on North Street that I used to stop at frequently, even when I lived on base, to have breakfast, and you were treated like a king there. The woman was really, really nice. There was another place where I kind of sat down and no one would even look at you. I mean, I sat there for a half hour before I realized nothing was going to happen. I remember passing a Native American one time near the Kmart parking lot. I was locking my car door, and he said, "He thinks we're going to steal his car," talking to his kid. I thought, you jerk. The kid's going to actually believe that for the rest of his life. So I really didn't have that much contact with the local population, living on base and traveling out to the middle of no place. But it was good news, bad news.

Oh, also the famous Newell Café. Two of the flights that I went to, Fox and Juliet, where Newells was on the way. We would stop there religiously, even though that was illegal. Every time we'd go out, we'd have supper on the way out and breakfast on the way back. The people there were just really, really nice. The owner one day . . . we stopped on a Sunday, and she said, "You know, we're not really open today. We're just kind of cooking a lot of fried chicken for this big town function that we're going to have, some church thing." I said, "Well, can we just buy some of the fried chicken?" She said, "Well, I guess you can. I'm not really sure what to charge you because we've actually never just sold chicken by the piece." So she came up with a price, we paid it, we were happy, we brought the chicken out. Came back for breakfast a couple of days later, and she said, "I'm really sorry, but I think I kind of

overcharged you for the chicken. Why don't you just have breakfast on us?" My deputy, his eyes just dilated. Breakfast was his life.

So there's good stories and bad stories, like everywhere else, but by and large, I didn't really interact with the local population that much. One of the nice things about being in missiles, it was a very low rank structure. Everybody was either a captain or a lieutenant in general. Most of your friends were on base and you kind of palled around with them. We'd go water skiing at Angostura and Pactola, places like that. So there wasn't that much interaction with the local population. And most of it was positive, some negative.

HOSKING: I figured. That's normal of most. We ask because there's actually gentlemen I've talked to off and on that said they had a lot of problems in the nineties, right at the very end. So it's interesting to see how it changes and evolves.

I guess getting out to your site, whichever, up in the 67th, you were talking about not being able to stop. Was that a typical rule for when you were in the missiles, no stops, go from base to . . .

CABRERA: You had to log out, sign out, whatever, at the base with the time, and when you got to the site, you actually had to call back. You weren't supposed to stop. The unspoken thing was most people did. Whether it was going through Sturgis or going up to Newell, or I guess Wall Drug, and whatnot, most people stopped. In fact, there was an A&W at Sturgis at the time, which was a popular watering hole. You'd drive by and there'd be four or five of these government vehicles out there, the crew vehicles, so . . .

HOSKING: . . . it happened. (chuckles) Once you got out to the Launch Control Facility, what was the routine? Or when was the first time you made contact with the LCF to gain entry?

CABRERA: Well, you'd pull up and, of course, they anticipated your coming because the changeover was about two or three o'clock in the afternoon. The site manager would meet you. To be honest with you, I know that in the DVD Chris says that the crew would authenticate with the crew downstairs. I don't remember doing that. Now, I'm not sure if it was because we didn't do it at that time or because I just forgot. But I don't remember ever getting code pages to authenticate with the crew downstairs. I think it was pretty much you showed you ID at the gate, and they knew you were coming, and they pretty much knew who you were because you went to the same site all the time for six months in a row. I'm fairly sure he was just calling downstairs to say hi, we're here, and they'd buzz you into the elevator area. I don't remember actually authenticating. I remember doing that once when I had to bring some code components out to a launch facility, and I went downstairs in the soft support building and called back to say I'm here. I authenticated then, but I didn't do

that on a routine basis. That may have been a procedure that started after I left, to the best of my knowledge.

HOSKING: That's kind of why we do this. There's a lot of changes. And it's kind of sad because sometimes it's this way this year, the next year they change it, then they change it back the following.

CABRERA: What I tell people on the tour is that I can tell you a slice of history. I can't tell you what happened in the late sixties or the nineties or the late eighties. Some of the pieces of equipment down here didn't exist when I was there. So if you say, what is that, I'll do what any good tour guide will do. If I don't know the answer, I'll tap dance around the issue and try to avoid the question. Or just make stuff up.

HOSKING: How long was your shift down in the capsule?

CABRERA: I was there during the forty-hour period, where essentially you spend three eight-hour shifts downstairs. Roughly eight hours, longer or shorter, depending on how long it took you to get out there. We were downstairs between about four o'clock in the afternoon and midnight, and we were downstairs again eight o'clock till about four o'clock, and then the final shift was midnight to about eight o'clock in the morning. Then we went home.

HOSKING: Did you do anything above ground for relaxation? Or was it pretty much eat, sleep, and then get ready?

CABRERA: I used to jog, which is another unspoken thing because we weren't allowed off the compound. But I always did. In fact, the security police would often jog as well. It was actually really cool. I'd never lived in an area like this, and it was really kind of nice. I found myself on some isolated dirt road jogging between two herds of cattle, and all of a sudden you realize there's five hundred head of cattle staring at you, in total silence. I'm going, okay, this is kind of cool.

HOSKING: Was there anything else that you'd end up doing above ground? Just entertainment, whether they had television available, or . . .

CABRERA: They had television. That was pretty much it. Sleeping, jogging, and . . . of course, after you were downstairs for the first eight hours, you went upstairs, it was about midnight or so, so you went to sleep. The problem was, then you went downstairs, and that was an okay shift. That was about eight in the morning until about four in the afternoon. Then you went upstairs, you watched a little TV, you jogged, you took a shower, and then you pretended that you slept because you really couldn't. As I tell people on the site, they may have had the windows blocked out, but there's a lot of noise, people playing basketball, mowing the lawns, watching television, just talking, shuffling back and forth. You really didn't sleep much. You might have dozed off a little bit.

So when you went downstairs at midnight, it wasn't that you were dragging or anything, it's just that you really hadn't slept. And about four in the morning or so, you're body's going, you know, it's like four in the morning, it's time to go to sleep. And you're going, just wait a little while longer.

One of the other unspoken things was, during the earlier years, when they had the thirty-six hour shift—twelve down, twelve up, twelve . . . and my shift, you couldn't sleep because of the two-man policy. All of a sudden they went to the twenty-four hour shift. It would be about 1977 or so. Now all of a sudden you *could* sleep. What changed? You still have nuclear code, it's still a two-man policy.

One of the other unspoken things that no one talks about is the fact that there were occasions where there was one crew out there when I was there, and the relief crew couldn't get out because of a blizzard. So you'd be out there—now, this didn't happen to me, but it could have—two days, three days. I actually got stuck in Denver, which is not exactly bad, because of the blizzard in South Dakota. I couldn't get back. There was one crew out there that I used to call every day to check in with, at Juliet, and they were out there for three or four days cursing me while I was calling in. So what happens? Okay. As human beings, you're going to need to sleep once in a while, and after three or four days, you're an extremist.

The people in charge would try to solve this problem all the time. Do you send a cop downstairs? Because they're really not qualified on a two-man policy. What do you do? What do you do? In reality, there was no problem. They slept. We're not talking twenty years like Rip Van Winkle, but you kind of just get the sand out of your eyes. You just kind of doze off a little bit. They had a bed down there, but you really couldn't use it. But they would use it.

The thing is, you were not in a high state of readiness. You weren't sitting there in posture with keys in the slots ready to go, with the sealed authenticators out. You were on a day-to-day state of readiness like we are right now. You never have to move more than five feet to get to where you need to be. You're never more than three seconds from any control panel. Plus, you didn't really sleep soundly because, once again, you had test messages coming over the thing pretty frequently. You'd get the message over the PAS, primary alerting system, then you'd get it over a few other types of communication systems, like HF radio and the survival frequency stuff. You knew exactly what sounds you were going to hear, and you just kind of slept with that stuff going through the back of your mind. So people, in cases like that, would doze off once in a while, which is actually probably safer than trying to tough it out for four days. But you couldn't say there was no problem because you had to pretend there was one.

What we would do during the last shift, which was pretty quiet, we would take turns kind of just taking a nap. I had my little routine. I would study some tech data, and then I would do whatever. I'd just do some reading during my shift. I'd hit alarm number two, which was a really annoying bell, and we'd just change places. It seemed to work.

HOSKING: I guess maybe an obvious question, if you weren't supposed to sleep, why did they have a bed down there? Did you ever find out?

CABRERA: The Air Force answer was . . . well, there's no answer. But like many questions regarding missiles, there's two answers—the Air Force answer and the real world answer. The real world answer is you slept once in a while. The Air Force answer was, when you change over, you have a lot of classified documents that you have to inventory and sign for, so you spread them out on the bed, because there was no place else to really spread stuff out down there. That was the Air Force answer. Now, why not have a table down there as opposed to a bed? Yeah. I think in reality they probably expected that if you were stuck out there for four days that you would sleep. They just couldn't say that.

HOSKING: Yeah. Just the way the policy was written at the time?

CABRERA: Yeah.

HOSKING: Sleeping, technically, wasn't allowed. Were there other things not allowed in the capsule while you were down there, that you can think of?

CABRERA: I'm not sure about this, but I would imagine that, technically, you're supposed to keep your uniform on. As you know, people didn't do that. We always brought our own clothes out. Technically, you couldn't bring your own food out. We always did. Back then they had a toaster oven and a refrigerator, and we would always bring stuff out and heat it out there, as opposed to eating those wretched foil packs, and whatnot.

In fact, I was there one time when the IG hit. When the IG would hit for the ORI, they would always send an evaluator out to each Launch Control Center, and they would observe daily exercise. That was a piece of cake. So the IG evaluator came downstairs and I offered him a cup of coffee. I mean, the coffee I brought out. He said, "Oh, that'd be great." Then I realized I shouldn't have this coffee out here, so I said, "Oops, sorry. We're out. Sorry about that." He says, "Damn." Because he really wanted that cup of coffee. Now, that sounds really silly, but it's the IG. You have to kind of play it straight.

So sleeping, eating at the Newell Café, bringing your own clothes out, bringing your own food out, rules that were written by some captain up at SAC that nobody really cared much for, and it was never really enforced. During

Commander's Call, they never kind of emphasized you really shouldn't be stopping at Newell Café. It was just kind of a wink and a nod.

HOSKING: Yeah. For places like that where it's like you really aren't supposed to, but . . .

CABRERA: Yeah. Now, having said all those horrible things that I *did*, I also did some things that you should do that a lot of people didn't. I actually studied tech data when I was out there. We had a lot of checklists that you never used out in the field but you always used in the trainer. And you say, well, if you use them a bunch of times. Well, it might be a couple of months before you go to the trainer, so I would just kind of routinely go over these checklists that you knew you were going have to use in the trainer so that I didn't really have to read them closely when I was in the trainer. I knew exactly what the steps were. Simple things, but things that you can also miss once in a while if you haven't looked at it for a while.

I used to inventory all the folders. We had a lot of binders in the capsule which contained a lot of information that you didn't normally use, even in the trainer you didn't normally use, but I just wanted to know exactly where everything was, what everything was, for reference. So I'd have a bit of time during each alert shift when I would do that.

I was doing a master's program. I'd reserve one part of one shift to do that and one part of one shift to do tech data. Generally, I kind of sort of phased down during the last hour or so in the morning, so I'd kind of take the HF radio, which was tuned to a predetermined frequency, I'd change it to like the BBC or something and just kind of put the headphones on and kind of kick back for like the last two hours before it was my turn to sleep. That was my routine. I just felt comfortable doing that.

HOSKING: Just kind of taking into account what the capsule looks like today that we have, I guess when you were coming in, what would you end up doing with your stuff? I know you've got bags, you've got your food, you had clothes. Where would you hang your clothes, your uniforms, that type of thing?

CABRERA: Well, you brought out a tech order bag with all your tech stuff, and then you brought out your own . . . some people brought a duffle bag, some people brought a small suitcase, or whatever. Or just another big knapsack kind of bag. Just take the uniform off, kind of neatly fold it up, put it in there, put the food in the fridge. You didn't bring lots of stuff out. I would always bring out a jug of water because the water out there was absolutely wretched. After you took a bath you felt like you needed to take another bath, you felt greasy, and whatnot. That really wasn't a problem, storing stuff.

HOSKING: We're constantly questioning because we don't know. It's like, where *would* you put it? I know with the bed situation we have with the modification, a

couple of people I've talked to actually open that up and put things in there to hide it. But I'm assuming the bed you had was more the metal cot.

CABRERA: No, it wasn't a cot. It was kind of like what you have up there now. From what I've read, they had cots out there at one time, but not when we were there.

HOSKING: Yeah. Because the metal cot I'm thinking of has springs on it and has a fabric mattress, not the foldout camping type cot.

CABRERA: As I remember, the bed was fairly close to what you have out there now. It seems about the same. The only difference now is that you have some controls at the head of the bed. I guess those are for air-conditioning or something like that. Those didn't exist then.

HOSKING: Now, with being partnered up with someone, did you usually end up with the same commander or same deputy, depending on what you were at the time?

CABRERA: Yeah, you did. It's just that you always had to go out with the same person, except when something official happened, like the person upgrades from deputy to commander, a person goes to the instructor shop, a person goes to permanent change of station. In a period of two years, I had five deputies. That caused another problem, because the policy was that you always had to go out with the same guy. Now, what happens if you've been around for a while and he hasn't, and it's Christmas and you've pulled the last two alerts for Christmas and he hasn't? You think it would be kind of nice if we kind of split up and he pulled his share this year and I got off. Couldn't do that, and that caused a problem. Not a huge problem. It was just an annoying thing. But yes, you had to go out with the same person all the time, unless something else happened, he was on leave, or he was departing, something like that.

HOSKING: And like sick leave, you ended up just getting partnered up with someone else, or did you both get pulled, or . . .

CABRERA: If he was going to be off for a while, yeah, you'd partner up with someone else temporarily. There'd be times when I guess he was on leave, or something like that, because I know I went out with another guy a couple times that was just kind of an offline sort of crewing area, temporary crewing.

HOSKING: How would you get along with most of your deputies?

CABRERA: Oh, fine, fine. Chris asked me how could you tell if a deputy was really good. He was really good if he was really annoying. In the trainer, as a commander, you kind of run the checklist. A really annoying deputy would say, "I'm not sure that that's the case, Commander." And he was annoying because he was right. Most of the time I was right; occasionally I was wrong. And when I was wrong, it really helped to have a good deputy sitting on the next chair that

could kind of say hold it a second. A lot of deputies would just say, "I agree. I agree. I agree." Sometimes you kind of agreed to a failure in the trainer because you just weren't really thinking. So I was very fortunate. Of the five deputies I had, four were really good. Saved my butt a few times. And their butt.

HOSKING: Did you have any problems in the capsule? Any equipment failures? I've heard about fires that happened once in a while, electrical fires.

CABRERA: No.

HOSKING: No major situations at all?

CABRERA: No. Just a couple of alerts where the shock isolators were out of tolerance and you were kind of at an angle during the thing. That was just kind of an annoyance more than anything else. There was also a checklist to actually fix that, to actually tell you how to adjust those things, and you could never do that. You had to send maintenance out to do that. I don't know if any crew actually ever solved a shock isolator problem. But, no, we never had any emergencies, never had any fires, the air-conditioning never crapped out or anything like that.

HOSKING: I know we deal with it a lot on the tour with the escape hatch. What did you think about your survivability in the capsule if nuclear war actually would happen?

CABRERA: What I tell people is that the escape hatch had a two-step checklist. Step one, the commander told the deputy to take the big manhole cover off; step two, the commander took the deputy's body and moved it off to the side because it was going to kill him. My opinion is that there's no safe way to actually take that big cover off. There's no real place to stand out there. I don't know how you stand on a little bit of a platform there and take a massive wrench and take this huge manhole cover off without killing yourself.

Secondly, I've never actually climbed up a forty-five degree angle tunnel. I'm not sure how you'd get into it because there's no ladder, but assuming you do. I've never actually done that. And then get up to the top with the blacktop, because it's a parking lot, and get through that, and then you're out there in an environment full of radioactivity. I tell people my impression was that your survivability was just enough to get you to turn keys, and after that you were pretty much on your own.

The other thing, too, is that the air coming into the capsule and going out goes through ducts, and those ducts have blast valves. The blast valves are spring-loaded at the open position. If they sense an over-pressure because of a nuclear blast nearby, they close, kachink. That's your air supply.

There's also a boring gray box that's near the refrigerator against the wall, and that was the air regeneration unit. You took the cover off and started cranking it, like an old organ grinder. That supposedly purified some of the air. What they say is that you probably would breathe more air doing that than you could purify. So your odds are slim to none, essentially.

HOSKING: Did you ever get to mess with things like that? Or it was just you knew where it was, you knew where the tech sheets were, you left it well enough alone?

CABRERA: Yes, that's exactly the case. Even during a trainer session or an evaluation session, you're never actually made to use that stuff. You would talk your way through it. You'd take the checklist out and you'd talk your way in. This is what I would do, this is what I would do. But you never actually messed with that stuff.

HOSKING: But, in essence, pretty much it was a fairly reliable system down there, as in equipment, the electronics, that type of stuff.

CABRERA: Yeah. What I tell people now is that you've got to remember this was technology circa 1970 or so. There's probably more computing power in your cell phone than there was in that entire Launch Control Center. But it seemed to work. Status monitoring was pretty good. You'd get the occasional fault light out at Delta 9 or Delta 6, or whatever. A little printer would print out what would be a fault light up on the indicator panel, and you'd get a little printout saying there's a problem at Delta 9. You'd hit that button and get a little recording. You'd call the information in to maintenance. But it hardly ever happened, just once in a great while.

The only thing that happened down there frequently was the outer zone security violations, that was mostly was just an anomaly or a tumbleweed or a turkey, or something like that. But the equipment seemed to work. I guess occasionally capsules had problems, but you didn't really hear about that much. Things tended to kind of work.

HOSKING: Looking back at what you did, we're going to run through a few of the last questions. How were race relations in your unit? Did you notice any situations?

CABRERA: There were no problems in the unit that I knew. The Air Force was still reeling from the sixties and from the Vietnam days when there were a lot of problems and, in response to that, the typical overreaction. Every year or so you had to go to a race relations type class. People resented that more than they resented other races, and whatnot. By the time you got out of there you were pissed off at everything. But, generally, no. We had Hispanics in the group, we had blacks in the group, and it was pretty congenial. Like I say, the Air Force was still a little sensitive to race relations because of the early seventies and the

Vietnam days where things were really bad. It was more of an institutional sensitivity as opposed to any individual animosities.

HOSKING: How serious did you take your job, and how serious do you think their deputies took their jobs?

CABRERA: I think very seriously in the sense that we were conscientious. We studied, we made sure that we were up on our . . . like I say, on the checklist, on procedures, things like that. Didn't get obsessed with it. People say, "Did you think a lot about turning keys? Did you think about the consequences of your job?" My answer is I look at that in terms of two different universes—the universe that we were in day to day, kind of like we are right now. Got a few problems in the world, but our national survival is not at stake. So we really didn't think about it much. We just thought about the next trainer ride or the next weekend or the next whatever.

Had we had our relations with the Soviet Union started to deteriorate, it would have been over a period of weeks and months, watching CNN, reading *Time* magazine. And I assume that would have been the other universe that you start thinking about. You start getting these messages telling you to start getting more and more ready to do your thing, which would have happened over a period of time. I'm not sure what I would have thought at that point. Obviously, you'd be in a much different state of mind. But that never happened, because we never went to a higher state of readiness during the time that I was there, which was good.

So on a day-to-day basis, I think we took the job seriously. We wanted to be proficient, but we didn't really worry about the missile's launching or the tanks coming down the Fulda Gap in Europe, or something like that. That really wasn't part of our world. Vietnam was over, we were at peace, and we were ready. And we wanted to be ready, but we never thought about what would happen if we got to the next stage.

HOSKING: Do you remember any practical jokes that took place, like in the capsule, something left behind from the previous crew, or . . .

CABRERA: Oh yeah. There's a switch by the commander's panel. Well, it's the launch switch on one side and the inhibit switch on the other side. There's a switch right in the middle that says "War Plan." War Plan A is straight up, War Plan B, down, is on the side. It was always on War Plan A for convention. It was a dead switch. It had meant something in previous years. It meant nothing when we were . . . you could play with it all day long, it didn't make any difference. But it was always on War Plan A, just for, like I say, convention. So if you had a new crew coming out, once in a while what you'd do is you'd just kind of take that switch and put it on War Plan B. When the new crew guy was running his

checklist, there was no reason to check that switch because it was a dead switch, so he wouldn't check it.

Now you're taking over eight hours later. You go downstairs, now you're writing the checklist to take over, and you go . . . it's on War Plan B. "Why is it on War Plan B?" "I don't know." "Well, how long has it been on War Plan B? This is important." Of course, the guy would panic. He didn't know. "I don't know." So you'd say, "Well, you need to call the Command Post and report this. This is serious." So he'd pick up the phone and call the Ellsworth Command Post and say, "This is Captain Smith at Delta 1. Our War Plan switch is on B." And their response would be, "You idiot. You just fell for the oldest trick in the book."

There was also the SACCS trick. SACCS I think was either 487L or 465L. It was one of the communication systems. It was a backup to the primary alerting system. It was kind of like a fax, an early fax. There was this big chute with a hopper, and when you'd get a SACCS message, a bell would go off and you'd hear kachunk. That was your message coming into the chute. Pick up the chute, take the message out. Occasionally, the site manager would call downstairs and say, "We've got a new cook," or a new security police guard. "He's going to fall for the old SACCS trick." So what I do is, I take a cigar. I used to smoke cigars. I'm sorry. It's a long time ago. I've given that up for years. I'd put a cigar in the SACCS thing and close the cover. I'd call up one of the Launch Control Centers that could send SACCS messages, and I'd say, "I'm going to call you for a cigar in a few minutes, okay? Just sent me a test message." "No problem."

So the cook would come downstairs, you'd give him a little tour, and then you'd say, "This backup system is called the SAC Automated Command Control System. It can send message electronically through the air. It can also send objects, like, I don't know, a cigar." So I pick up the phone, call Juliet and say, "You want to send me a cigar?" "No problem." Kachunk. Open up. Out comes a cigar. And the kids goes, "Was that on a conveyor belt?" I'd say, "No, it came from Juliet," or wherever. That's fifty miles away. "How did that happen?" "Well, it came electronically, just like I mentioned before." And he goes, "Jesus. Do they know you have stuff like that down here?" I said, "It's not classified. Don't worry about it." "God. It's like Star Wars."

Now the problem comes when he gets off shift, goes back to the base, goes to the barracks, and tells his friends, "You wouldn't believe what they have out there." Sort of the lighter side of nuclear holocaust.

HOSKING: I figured you have to do something to keep it light, or else . . . yeah, have issues. Looking back at it, how did you feel about being a possible target?

CABRERA: Well, that's kind of like the other question. I really didn't think about that. Because it just wasn't part of our reality back then. The deterrence seemed to work. Once again, had we been in that posture eight with the keys in the slots and the documents out, I'd be thinking, This is awful. I guess the thing is, it's not like World War II or Korea, which was awful. This was so much more awful. Exponentially, so much so, the potential damage and whatnot. It's not a question of who would have won and who would have lost. I mean, life would essentially end as we know it on this planet for a hundred years, or a thousand years. I guess it was just so potentially so bad that we really just didn't think about it. Maybe we just blocked it out of our minds. I didn't worry about turning keys or even worry about annihilation, or whatnot. I just kind of didn't think about it, because we didn't have to. It wasn't shoved in our faces.

HOSKING: Did you know much about the Soviet side, the missile systems?

CABRERA: No, not really.

HOSKING: So you didn't really know what our systems were up against.

CABRERA: We assumed that they had a capacity close to ours, if not more so or less so. But I mean, once again, the potential mega-tonnage that you're talking about is so overwhelming that you just assume that . . . well, it's like Chris and I talked about. Each side knew that they could inflict incredible damage on the other side, but could not prevent them from inflicting incredible damage on our side. That's pretty much all I knew. That's pretty much all you really needed to know.

HOSKING: I guess with our system, if you had to do a key turn, do you think it would have actually worked?

CABRERA: Yeah. No reason not to. Now, having said that, they talk about randomly selecting a missile occasionally and just bringing it to Vandenberg. I was on one of those crews. I know Kerry was, too. What they would do, they would select three crews to go out there with a whole bunch of maintenance people. I was actually off duty the night they would have turned keys, so I was there in my civilian clothes out at Vandenberg at the Launch Control Center. As the two crews who were . . . the crew that was on duty and the backup crew, they were scrambling around in their uniforms, I noticed on the indicator panel a light came on that said "DC no-go," which essentially means that you're no longer talking to the missile computer, and whatnot. One of the crews went, "That's okay. It's okay." I said, "It's not okay. It means the missile's not going."

So having said I'm sure the missiles would have gone, but one test I went on didn't go. It sort of crapped out is the word, it's a technical term. Of course, I think they changed the wing logo to . . . the Vandenberg maintenance people

blamed it on the Ellsworth maintenance people, and vice versa. So the new logo was pointing fingers, like that. So that didn't go, but I've got no reason to believe that most of the missiles that were executed would have gone.

HOSKING: Just kind of hindsight looking back at it, do you have any really bad memories that stick out about the whole system situation, whatever?

CABRERA: I went to Vandenberg initially for the training, and you had two and a half days of orientation. You'd watch movies and things like that. There was a captain that was really cool that had come from Ellsworth and he ran that little session. We asked him, "How do you feel about being on crew and being in the missile career field for three or four years," and he went, "You know, it's really not a bad job, and it's a different environment than eight to five office work. I've really kind of enjoyed it. The main problem was that people . . . the system is just so paranoid about nuclear weapons and about just killing people if they make the slightest mistake." And that really was true. It was institutional paranoia.

One time . . . I was fairly new on crew and they had a code change. That's the one time you really worked. They were sending teams that would leapfrog from one base, one launch facility to the next, running new tapes, new data into the missiles, and whatnot. There were a whole bunch of tapes that we actually had custody of in the Launch Control Center. The missile crews would come out to us, we'd sign the tape over to them, and then they'd go out to the field and run it into Delta 9, Delta 7, or whatever. It's my fault, I know it's my fault. I gave the maintenance crew the wrong tape. It was called a T-tape. I forget what a T-tape was even for. So I said, "Is this the T-tape you want?" He goes, "I don't know. Just sign here." So I gave him the T-tape.

Later on, I was on the phone with a few other guys in the flight. Somebody was talking about the new T-tape. They said "new." That implies there was an old one. I actually called the base to verify if I'd given that person the right tape. I'd given the person the wrong tape. So he ran it into the missile, and if it hadn't been corrected, the missile would not have responded to inquiries after a while. I got the situation corrected. I called back to the codes vault. They said, "No problem." They sent the team back to my Launch Control Center and gave them the right T-tape.

Anyway, the bottom line is, I made a mistake, got it fixed, fine. Before we change over the next morning, I get a phone call from the squadron saying, "Hey, how you doin'? Listen, would you mind dropping in on your way back before you go home?" Because, technically, once you'd signed off that vehicle you were free for the rest of the day. I said, "No, that's no problem." They were building gallows for me, okay? Essentially, they said, "We're going to give you a letter of reprimand." And they had the letter of reprimand all typed up already, all set to go. I think what they were afraid of was that if they didn't do

this quietly, it would get back to the wing commander and he'd get really pissed. So they were trying to quietly kind of just take care of this little thing. But it kind of pissed me off a little bit. I made a mistake, I admitted it, I corrected it, took care of the whole thing, and yet they felt they had to hang me. I mean, it didn't affect me in any serious way, but it just was really annoying. And there was that SAC paranoia about nuclear weapons, and it just was . . .

A few things not as serious as that happened also. You had to take this codes test every month. We called it a bold print test. Bold prints were little paragraphs in bold print that you had to sort of kind of memorize. You took a test once a month, and you actually had to . . . they'd give you the paragraph and they had a couple of blanks, and you had to kind of fill in the blanks with A, B, C or D. This was, I think, my second codes test. The bold print was, Should you detect a weapons system violation, be sure to report it to the . . . answer A was the Ellsworth Command Post, which is what you do, so I put down A. Wrong answer. The bold prints were standard for every base, so the answer was Unit Command Post. And this little shaky captain says, "You just failed the test. If you missed one question, you failed the test." He gives me this retraining package that literally was six inches thick. He said, "You need to go through this retraining program and come on back at two o'clock and test." I thought he was kidding. He wasn't.

So, essentially, I put down the answer that I would have done, but it wasn't the answer that was the correct answer. And this two hours of retraining, I went back to the codes vault to take the test, and this major says, "I can see you're trending toward deficiency." This is my second test ever. I missed one question. But he was kind of like . . . that sort of SAC paranoia thing, you know? That bothered me a lot. I wasn't unhappy to leave that after four years. The lifestyle was good, but there was that kind of annoying little bit of paranoia in the background all the time.

HOSKING: I guess on the flip side, was there any memory that really sticks out as being a really good one about the whole experience?

CABRERA: Well, after being on crew for a couple of years, I got a phone call from the Emergency War Order classroom people asking me if I wanted to be an instructor. I felt kind of weird because I had been on crew for two years, there were people that had been on crew four and five years. I'm going to be their instructor? Because this was recurring training. There was a SAC regulation that said . . . this big lesson plan. You had to have so much training in this part of the lesson plan and that part of the lesson plan. I was a little overawed at first because I thought, Can I do this?

It turns out I did it very well. After I was in the EWO shop for a while, you start going through the crew roster of all the people in the wing, and you realize a

lot of people are really kind of substandard in terms of they wouldn't give a damn about their proficiency, and whatnot. I found that I was actually one of the better crew members in the sense that I worked at it. I studied. I didn't miss EWO tests, I didn't miss questions, I didn't . . . so I was really flattered that I was actually accepted for this position as a relatively junior person. I was a captain but I'd only been there two years. There were guys that had been there six, seven, eight years.

So that was kind of cool. That was an experience I'd never had before, being a classroom instructor, and I just loved it. I thought it was great. I kind of enjoy doing this now as kind of an offshoot of doing that back then.

HOSKING: I kind of skipped over it before anyway, and now that you bring it back up, as the instructor, was it strictly classroom, or were you in a trainer?

CABRERA: No, it was classroom. You had two different types of classes. You had EWO training and then you had weapons system training. Weapons system training, you had the instructor crews, and they would actually conduct classes. They were the ones who actually did the Missile Procedures Trainer. Then you had EWO training, and that was strictly classroom. You had to have two and a half hours of that a month, and then you had to take a test. I used to actually write the test and do the classroom instruction.

HOSKING: I'm assuming EWO stands for what, Emergency War Order?

CABRERA: War Order, yeah.

HOSKING: Too many acronyms. We're bad with it, too, so I'm sure you've heard a lot of our acronyms throughout the summer. I had another question. I should have written it down. Is there anything that you'd like to add, anything I might not have asked, any experiences you had that you'd like to include, anything along those lines?

CABRERA: Well, nothing significant. I remember going out there one time . . . in fact, it was the time when the IG was out there. That was kind of cool, because we kind of sailed through that little exercise, and he was impressed. The problem was that there was some bad weather, and the crew that should have come out to relieve us didn't make it. We had a crew upstairs, a crew downstairs. Because of scheduling problems . . . how do I put this? If we had gone home like one shift later than we should have, it would have messed up their scheduling for the rest of the month. So rather than letting us go home one shift later, they let the crew that was supposed to relieve us go home first, and we were out there for essentially two alert shifts, because of a scheduling problem. Needless to say, you get a little upset about things like that. So you're out there for like . . . instead of forty hours, you're out there for eighty

hours because of a scheduling problem. Is that significant? No, it's not. It just kind of stands out in my memory a little bit.

By and large it was a good experience. I had good deputies. Also, when you walked into the club on a Friday night, you knew everybody. Especially as a class instructor. Everybody came through your classroom at least once a month. The camaraderie was good. I had a lot of good friends. The guy who was the flight commander at Delta 1 is still a friend of mine. Another guy in Pittsburgh, we were on crew together for four years. Not on the same crew, but we've kept in touch all these years, and whatnot. So it was a good experience. Especially coming from finance where you're the only officer in the entire office. Now everybody was a captain, so it was a much more horizontal level kind of playing field.

So by and large I enjoyed the experience. I probably wouldn't have volunteered for it, but . . . that wasn't an issue, because I really didn't know much about it. It was kind of a foreign career field. So by and large a positive experience with a few frustrations, but life is full of frustrations. I had them before, I had them after I left. Before missiles and after missiles. But looking back, I'm glad I did it. I found out something about myself, that I was actually good in a classroom environment, and that gave me a lot of confidence later on in terms of speaking and dealing with people. I found it something I really enjoy doing for a change, as opposed to just having a fairly well paying job like I kind of sort of did. I really enjoy doing that.

HOSKING: Did you ever deal with the officers that were pilots?

CABRERA: No.

HOSKING: So you never really had any experiences with them whatsoever?

CABRERA: No. Not on a professional basis, which is probably you never are going to have a professional experience with a pilot.

HOSKING: We've just kind of been getting a consensus on the treatment between the missileers versus the pilots.

CABRERA: I worked at Six Flags park, and somebody asked a question one time. They had a dolphin act and they had a whale act. Do the dolphins and whales ever actually interact? And the answer was no. We put them all in the same tank one time, and the dolphins kind of swam over there and the whales kind of swam over there. There was pilot world and there was everything else world. It wasn't a question of pilots and missiles, it's pilots and non-pilots.

HOSKING: I guess for the last question, since you've walked through the capsule so many times now this summer, what's the overriding thing that's missing, whether it's

a sound, an object, a sight, a smell. Is there something that you think, wow, this should have something or other?

CABRERA: I guess the motor generator. We always had that hum in the background. You didn't really hear it anymore, but you felt it was there. It's just so silent down there now. I mean, even when people are there, that one dimension, I guess, is not there anymore. Also, the fact that there was a lot of chatter over the various communication systems. You'd get several . . . not so much exercises, but test messages during the day would come over the primary alerting system. They'd come over the SACCS machine. The one that was the fax would come over the low frequency system that would go kachunk, kachunk, kachunk. So there was always kind of a chatter going on. It was kind of a break in the action almost from the monotony of just reading or studying or whatnot. I kind of miss that. It kind of made you feel there was somebody actually out there.

HOSKING: Okay. Well, that pretty much concludes the questions we have. We'd like to really thank you for all you've done this summer, as well as participating in this.

CABRERA: My pleasure. It was fun.

[end]